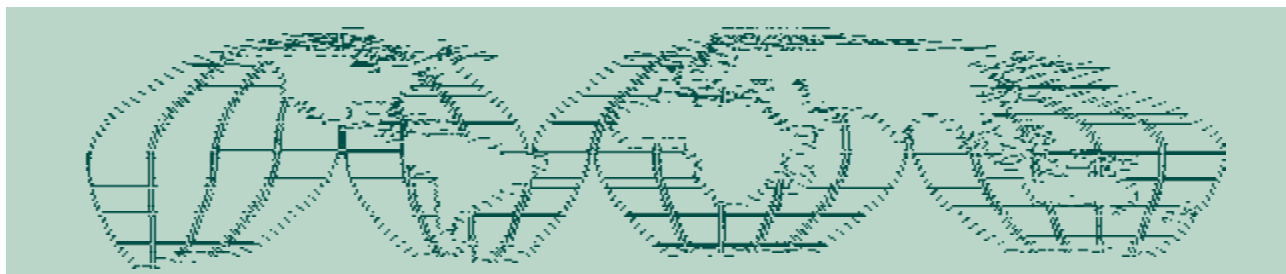

Aftermath: Women and Gender Issues In Postconflict Guatemala



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Overview

GUATEMALA IS A COUNTRY of paradoxes. Its spectacular landscape has provided a backdrop for some of the most horrific human rights violations in the Western Hemisphere. It is the only nation in Latin America with an Indian majority. But Guatemala's indigenous population, the Maya, has historically been the object of a virulent racism that has left it with some of the lowest social indicators in the hemisphere. Power in the country is vested in a small elite primarily of European origin and in the *ladinos*, a term that applies both to persons of mixed Indian-European descent and to acculturated indigenous people. Guatemala is rich in natural resources. But recent decades of political struggle have retarded its economic growth.

This Highlights forms part of USAID's Center for Development Information and Evaluation (CDIE) multicountry evaluation of gender issues in postconflict societies. The assessment examines the effects Guatemala's political violence of the early 1980s had on women and gender issues in the country. A five-woman team of two U.S.-based scholars and three local researchers performed fieldwork in the country in February and March 2000. The team compiled its findings in a Working Paper, also called "Aftermath: Women and Gender Issues in Postconflict Guatemala." That report can be found online at www.dec.org/partners/dexs_public.

A Country Riven By Two Ideologies

In 1954 Guatemala's leftist and democratically elected president was overthrown by the anticommunist, CIA-backed National Liberation Movement. That coup and the 1962 rise of a Marxist guerrilla opposition set the stage for two generations of political violence.

After 1954 the state became militarized, highly exclusionary, and antidemocratic. It systematically 1) closed off political space to political and social movements that challenged the status quo, 2) promoted a system of multiple social exclusions, 3) tilted the balance of power between the legislative and judicial branches of the government to the benefit of the military/executive branch, and 4) used repression as a substitute for law.*

Guatemala's armed struggle lasted from 1960 through 1996. Though repression characterized the entire era, the type and severity of violence applied against the population varied over time. The most concentrated violence occurred during 1978–85, a period

*Two separate human rights reports recently concluded that state forces were responsible for about 90 percent of the atrocities committed during 1990–96, with guerrilla groups responsible for the balance. One report estimates that some 200,000 people died or disappeared during confrontations in those years.

that put an imprint of terror on the country that remains today. From the late 1970s, the guerrillas had a substantial presence in certain parts of the land. The army believed that the popular resistance enjoyed support among the Maya population. This situation elicited the different governments' wholesale assault, which devastated the largely indigenous highlands.

State repression and violence accelerated sharply during 1981–82, corresponding to a scorched-earth campaign inaugurated by Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt. This period is referred to simply as *la violencia*. Ríos Montt took power in a March 1982 coup and was himself overthrown in August 1983. Estimates of the number of Guatemalans displaced during his campaign, either internally or beyond the country's borders, range from 500,000 to 1.5 million.* By 1983 the army had routed the armed resistance, and by its own count had eliminated 440 indigenous villages entirely. An estimated 20,000 Guatemalans died violently during 1981–83. Upwards of 80 percent of them were Maya.

In the early to mid-1980s there was international pressure for the army to return Guatemala to a civilian government. In 1985 it did so, determining that the guerrilla movement was sufficiently weakened. The next year, Marco Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo, head of the Christian Democratic Party, was inaugurated president, the first civilian elected in a free and fair election since the 1950s. Also in 1986, the national assembly held elections and promulgated a new constitution. Although Cerezo and his successors were limited in their autonomy from the army, the civilian executive branch

*Guatemala's current population is 12 million. The variation in the estimates of refugees reflects the changing nature of displacement. About 150,000 people sought safety in Mexico. Fewer fled to Belize, Honduras, the United States, and Canada. Many internally displaced people hid in the mountains. Others sought the relative anonymity and safety of Guatemala City. But an overwhelming majority of the war's victims remained in their villages.

of government has steadily gained power. In December 1996 the government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity signed the Peace Accords, officially ending the country's 36-year civil war.

Effects of the War On Women

Psychological and Physical Ramifications

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Because most of the protagonists in Guatemala's armed conflict were men, so were most of the victims of state violence. But about 25 percent of the direct victims of human rights violations and acts of violence were women. They were raped, tortured, and killed, sometimes because of their ideals and political or social participation, sometimes in massacres or other indiscriminate acts. Thousands of women were widowed and thus became the sole breadwinners for their children. Yet because of the destruction of their homes and crops under the scorched-earth

policy, these women often had no material resources.

Women who witnessed violence or lost family members continue to suffer psychological and physical ailments, or *tristeza*—literally the embodiment of suffering, or suffering incorporated. A human rights report compiled a list of psychophysical and emotional ailments that continued to plague witnesses and victims of state-sponsored violence up to two decades after the acts themselves. These included sensations of sadness, prolonged mourning, psychosomatic problems, eating disorders, and feelings of injustice, helplessness, isolation, and loneliness.

Sexual violence was a common strategy of the counterinsurgency forces in the early 1980s. When women were captured and raped by soldiers, they were

often forced to cook and clean for them afterward. Sexually enforced servitude humiliated and broke women down both emotionally and physically. The guilt and shame of rape victims, compounded by Maya and Latin cultural mores, prevent women from seeking help for the *tristeza* brought by their assault. Rape is almost never discussed openly in Guatemala. Victims, like female victims of violence in general, are more likely to be sharp, impatient, and abusive toward their children. Thus, they pass to the next generation the indirect consequences of the violence they suffered.

The process of grieving the loss of loved ones killed during the war in Guatemala is acute. In psychological terms, the mourning for a person who has disappeared is more attenuated than the mourning for someone known to be dead, even when the latter died violently. Within Maya culture, even among orthodox Catholics and Protestants, the living have an ongoing relationship with the dead. For survivors, this essential relationship cannot be realized fully until the lost relative is known to be dead and the remains are put to rest properly.

Maya society in particular (and Guatemalan society in general) is extremely patriarchal. Religious brotherhoods, councils of male elders, and kinship networks form the bases of local power and identity. In making the transition from wife to widow, women lost their status relative to their husbands'. Maya widows sometimes lost their places within the local hierarchies of kinship. In traditional Maya society, widows do normally have a sanctioned status within the community, where they enjoy respect and support. But the violence of the war stigmatized many widows. As a result, they did not receive the economic and emotional help they needed from their villages and extended families.

Most Guatemalan widows do not remarry. Many cannot find suitable and willing mates among a pool of men shrunk by killings and disappearances. The violence was so pervasive that, in effect, it left some

"cities of women," villages where adult males were absent. Though the effects were mainly pernicious, the situation did, in some instances, open new political space for women. Some widows' organizations addressed the economic and social needs of Maya women.

The use and misuse of alcohol are common in rural Guatemala. Drunkenness is a customary component of the traditional *fiesta* system. But excessive consumption outside traditional venues has increased in the

wake of the violence of the early 1980s. This is equally true of both witnesses to violence and perpetrators of it—men who served in the civil patrols, the army, or the guerrilla forces. A study conducted for the Guatemalan army shows that upwards of 50 percent of discharged soldiers became full-blown alcoholics. Male witnesses or victims of violence are more likely than nonvictims or females to drink heavily. The increase in male alcoholism has resulted in a rise

in wife and child abuse. Among Maya women before the war, alcoholism was rare. But by the 1990s, anthropologists have noted, regular drinking to escape grief and other suffering had become common among women.

In family life, Guatemalan women continue to suffer the long-term effects of *la violencia*. There seems to be a correlation between military service and the incidence of family violence. Women whose husbands returned from the guerrilla forces or military service suffer the double burden of dealing with male family members who are also affected by trauma and who also must readapt to life within the family.

In 1996 Guatemala promulgated a strongly worded law against family violence. But certain cultural constraints prevent such decrees from having teeth. There is a prevailing conception among Ladinos and Maya alike that women are, at some level, the property of men. There also is a stereotype that women who provoke aggression from their companions bring it on

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themselves. That view legitimizes violence against women, even in the eyes of law-enforcement officials.

A 1998 U.S. State Department human rights report identified intrafamily violence, and particularly violence against women, as a serious human rights problem in Guatemala. In the late 1990s, USAID/Guatemala initiated support of some women's organizations that champion women's rights in the face of abuse. Despite such efforts, family violence and sexual violence against women remain "silent crimes" that lie outside current models of healing and recovery.

Many effects of violence are long term and hold the potential to be passed from one generation to the next. The manifestations of the culture of violence are particularly evident in family behavior—in abuse, beating, spousal rape, and alcoholism. The perpetrators and the victims themselves may not understand this to be the embedded consequence of years of civil violence. In this regard, a gender-oriented response is clearly called for, not only for women but also for men to receive the training and counseling they need to cease abusive lifestyles.

The Economic Aftermath

The rural, primarily indigenous women who remained in their villages during the armed struggles faced nearly insurmountable obstacles in reestablishing lives for themselves and their surviving families without male family members. Their economic plight was severe. The scorched-earth policy, by design, destroyed principal crops. The small livestock the families owned were often lost, stolen, or killed. Because the division of labor in Maya society dictates that men cultivate subsistence crops and migrate perennially to the southern coast for seasonal labor, women were forced to absorb the costs of hiring men to help them tend their fields, or assume the job themselves. In the latter scenario, women took on "men's labor" in addition to their traditional domestic tasks.

Since la violencia, women heading households have tried, with limited success, to branch out into commercial agricultural production. This expansion has aggravated tensions over traditional patrilineal land conveyances and ownership patterns. Though women are legally permitted to hold title to land, their access is hampered by custom, widespread illiteracy, and ignorance of the law. Moreover, many women,

and widows in particular, lack access to credit because of the requirement that fathers or husbands cosign loans.

Although most Guatemalan women continue to live in rural areas, the civil violence and the worsening of rural poverty in the war's wake in the early 1980s promoted migration to the city—a pattern that continues. In 1990, 39 percent of Guatemalan women lived and worked in urban areas, compared with 37 percent of men. The vast majority of female urban migrants are employed in domestic work and, to a lesser extent, the service industries.

The Gender-Specific Experience of Exile

During 1981–83, some 46,000 Guatemalans were registered and received refugee aid from the Mexican government and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. People from many different Maya and Ladino cultural backgrounds were brought together in the refugee camps, where many also had, for the first time, the means and support to become organized and had access to training, education, health care, and human rights.

Some specific training went to women. They participated in courses on literacy, reproductive health, human rights, and women's educational rights. Many also learned Spanish for the first time (many isolated Maya speak only the Mayan tongue), along with the basic ability to read and write. In the Mexican camps, refugee women worked together in small-scale production projects. Through these they earned income and built self-esteem, along with a modicum of leverage within family life.

In 1990, Mamá Maquin was established, the first formal women's organization for female Guatemalan refugees in the Mexican states where they lived. The association aimed to go beyond organizing women on a project-by-project basis and to analyze their status as women within their families and communities. By 1993, there were two more organizations with a similar mission.

Many families learned hard lessons of gender equity during the years in refugee camps in Mexico. Women were aggressively offered training and empowerment through international aid organizations.

There was hope that women would bring the new experiences and skills they had acquired as refugees back to Guatemala. But after the resettlement of refugees began in the late 1980s the gender training in the camps was lost in the process of reintegration. First, women lost touch with one another and thus their social network for motivation and support. Second, because their husbands failed to receive similar training, women tended to be relegated to a subordinate status upon their families' return to Guatemala. Finally, the commitment to reconstructing their lives tended to exhaust the returnees' time and relegate them to conventional domestic chores.

This same pattern seems the case in families that went into internal exile and became part of the Communities of Populations in Resistance. The CPRs were made up of peasant families who fled their homes in the early 1980s and established covert mobile communities in the remote areas of northern El Quiché. Part of the Guatemalan population displaced by state violence, these internal exiles had no access to international relief or any legal status as refugees.

A "hidden" category of refugees is the thousands of indigenous women who sought refuge from political violence in the anonymity of the city. While many are still identifiable as indigenous, others have chosen "ladinoization" as a survival strategy. Such women are undetectable to most local and international agencies that work for and with female victims of the war.

An additional stress on families in the cities is the pressure to relinquish Indian identity. Some urban migrants assimilate to avoid discrimination. For many others the loss of cultural identity is a highly undesirable side effect of displacement. The loss of culture is particularly stressful for women; many believe they have failed to fulfil their socially prescribed roles as purveyors of tradition, culture, and identity.

Civilian Security in Rural and Urban Society

Although strongman Ríos Montt's scorched-earth policy burned a swath of human and physical devastation so broad that many social scientists have deemed it genocide, his regime also brought a period of enforced peace to the countryside. Many Guatemalans view this with ambivalence. Many rural Guatemalans recall the spring 1982 passage of Ríos Montt's Amnesty Law as a watershed, when political violence became more targeted and less random and capricious. Likewise, during the Ríos Montt administration, random urban violence diminished precipitously.

With the return to civilian government in 1986, however, civilian security began to spiral out of control, especially as discharged members of the former security forces entered civilian society. By the mid-1990s, social statistics placed Guatemala City second only to Bogotá in per capita violent crimes among Latin American cities.

Rural areas also experienced an increase in crime, including banditry, during this period, particularly along major highways and in tourist centers. Civilian security continues to be an appealing political issue in Guatemala, as evidenced by the continuing popularity of Ríos Montt in political polls. Security concerns accounted for the dominance of his party, the Guatemalan Republican Front, in the 1999 presidential and national assembly elections.

Women in the Political Arena

The violence of the early 1980s pushed an unprecedented number of Maya and Ladina women into the political arena. The immediate cause of political mo-

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bilization usually was trauma: the loss or disappearance of a loved one, or the economic and social demands of widowhood. Indeed, the most important national and local women's organizations have their origins in trauma. In contemporary Guatemala, human rights and gender are entwined issues in most women's organizations.

A proportionally fair number of women serve in elected offices at the departmental and national levels. Women are less well represented in municipal government. Women's voter participation is relatively high. In the presidential election held at the end of 1999, women accounted for 48 percent of the votes in the first round and 35 percent in the second round. Nevertheless, many women vote as their husbands instruct them.

The National Coordination of Widows of Guatemala (Conavigua), the country's largest women's organization, emerged as a support group in 1988 and now claims more than 14,000 Maya and Ladina members nationwide. The human rights NGO Association for Workers' Rights (GAM) includes men in its activities, but its membership is primarily female. Its organizational prominence has catapulted a surviving founder, Nineth Montenegro, into the national political arena. The same process has made smaller local organizations a source of women's empowerment toward social and political advancement in civil society.

A second avenue into politics for women has been through direct family connections: a woman enters into politics because of the influence of a prominent husband or father. In such cases, the woman is largely a proxy for a deceased male family member (such as when Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú entered politics after the deaths of her father, brothers, and mother) or as an adjunct to a powerful male family member (such as Ríos Montt's daughter, Zury Ríos Soto, now a powerful leader in the national assembly).

When the effects of la violencia and the long civil war have dissipated, will there be political space for women in civil society? Will women be willing to enter the public sphere if they no longer perceive politics as an extension of the domestic sphere? There is political will to suggest that both these questions can be answered affirmatively.

The Peace Accords include specific agreements that address the rights of women. Ríos Soto calls them "the floor on which a house can be built." Since 1996, the national assembly has publicized an array of laws up-

holding women's rights within the family, their protection against family violence, and their rights to own and sell land. There also has been some political will to create a permanent national institute of women to guarantee that women's rights are a priority in future legislation and policy planning at the national level. In May 2000 the Secretaria de la Mujer (Secretariat of Women) was created by government decree.

Even so, women's organizations feel short-

changed, because a secretariat (in contrast to an institute) depends directly on the executive branch of government. Female activists across Guatemala's political spectrum question the political will of male policymakers toward creating meaningful legislation and social policy furthering women's rights, even in basic areas such as education and health.

Most women prominent in politics consider gender questions most important where they intersect with larger conceptions of social justice, such as social reconciliation and political development. Common points of juncture include issues such as human rights and, most emphatically, education for girls—an issue raised by nearly every woman political figure the CDIE team interviewed. They maintain that the lag in basic education for girls is the greatest source of gender ineq-

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Despite some promising and tangible signs of advancement, many obstacles prevent women's rejuvenation in the wake of Guatemala's long war. Despite a host of rights specified in the Peace Accords and some significant social will toward correcting Guatemala's deep-rooted racism, many still labor under the double stigma of being indigenous and being women. This is truest of the victims of violence of the 1980s. Yet because nearly 20 years have passed since the worst civil violence, policy must also be directed toward those women whose posttraumatic stress is not so apparent in contemporary civil society.

Recommendations

USAID has a coherent program to assist women who were directly affected by the violence of the early 1980s. The Agency has supported many projects that specifically support the gender-related needs of widows, returnees, and other direct victims of the violence. USAID should carefully monitor those projects to ensure that other international resources do not overly dictate the programmatic mandates of the projects, isolate the leadership of grass-roots women's organizations from their core membership, or generate excessive dependence on external assistance.

1. USAID should consider the long-term consequences of violence. The effects of Guatemala's conflict are embedded deeply in its people. Most adults cannot remember a time before the government was at war with its people. In promoting social reconciliation in civil society, the Agency must take into full account the effects of state-sponsored violence; its direct and indirect consequences must be incorporated in programmatic planning. To that end, USAID should support organizations that address conflict resolution, cultural reconstruction, long-term mental-health issues among victims, and personal security for women and children.

2. The Agency should support local programs. The violence has brought to the fore many problems that will continue troubling Guatemalan communities until they are tackled decisively. Because it is often most effective to confront deeply ingrained problems from a culturally appropriate perspective, USAID should identify and support local programs that work effectively in the following areas: alcoholism, family violence, sexual crimes, conflict resolution, cultural reconstruction, poverty (especially among Maya), the various causes of the war, long-term grief and depression, and cultural loss resulting from urban migration and displacement.

3. While women's issues should be addressed with great purpose and specificity, USAID should take care to avoid "ghettoizing" solutions. Gender or "women's" projects should not be overemphasized at the expense of other areas of need. This recommendation stems from the complaint that women's organizations rarely receive funding for projects that are not overtly "women specific," even when such projects have clear but implicit gender implications. There is also evidence that some organizations have used the rhetoric of gender to gain outside funding, even when gender is not truly a primary (or even secondary) emphasis of their work.

4. USAID should work to realize the full potential of its gender-mainstreaming mandate. A truly gender-specific response demands recourse for both women and men. (The absence of men in gender training, for example, hampered the status of women refugees upon their return to Guatemala.) Though USAID/Guatemala should take pride in its support of many programs that address the immediate needs of Maya war widows, it could strengthen its programmatic support in dealing with the war's secondary effects, particularly regarding traumatized men. Until the effects of the conflict on men are also addressed directly, the adverse situation of women can improve only incrementally.

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This Highlights, by Michael Hopps of Conwal Incorporated, summarizes the findings of Working Paper No. 311, "Aftermath: Women and Gender Issues in Postconflict Guatemala," by Virginia Garrard-Burnett. To access this Highlights or other CDIE documents from the Internet, key in www.usaid.gov. Click on [Publications/Partner Resources](#), then on [USAID Evaluation Publications](#).
